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Neoliberal Aesthetics: 250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People

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ABSTRACT Eunsong Kim challenges existing literature on Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, articulating Sierra's neoliberal aesthetics as part of a process of managing the imagination of finance capitalism. By situating Sierra's performance art as a performance of terror, Kim argues that Sierra does not just collaterally reproduce capitalist power relations, but coldly and calculatedly exploits and violates the bodies of the working poor, particularly people of color, for his own profit and for the viewing pleasure of his wealthy audiences. Kim fiercely critiques the ways Sierra profits from his use of Marxist discourse and appeals to political action. In doing so, Kim challenges scholars and artists to embrace the position of laborers and take up Black Radicalism against artistic instantiations of capitalism.



"The Goddess Durga as Phoolan Devi" Maya Mackrandilal, 2015

Challenging and highlighting abusive power dynamics in our culture is my goal, replicating them is not. Please cease and desist.

—Kara Walker to Clifford Owens regarding "Anthology"

In *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, six men enter the gallery space to be tattooed for 30 dollars each, or their expected daily income as migrant laborers. *250cm* was an enactment by the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra that attempted to turn the abjection of economic devastation into a performance for the global north consumer. In this essay I examine the politics, the financial structure, and the rhetoric surrounding Sierra's gallery enactments, to situate a working definition of neoliberal aesthetics. Without the shield of conceptual performance art or exceptionalist applications of critical theory, Sierra's

projects and the responses to them may be viewed merely as examples of the cruelty of wealth, revealing how wealth¹ is the transferred enactment of global brutality. The purpose of this examination is to confront the construction and placement of performative terror, or terror situated as performance and how such enactments, using capital's imagination, define alterity as raw and disposable material. I argue that *250cm* is not a critique against white supremacy or a fantasy about the destruction of capitalism; it is instead the aestheticization of racialized poverty and abjection. Accepting the premise of performance, collaboration or critique within *250cm*'s enactment requires acceptance of a logic where only the artist can give Alterity value—without the artist, Alterity is merely the signifier of damnation, with the artist present, it becomes revolutionary material. The cultural and economic politics embedded in Sierra's work naturalize and aestheticize abjection and insist that the body of The Other is material to be molded by the artist.

Neoliberalism as Jodi Melamed has discussed in *Represent and Destroy*, "[R]emains a form of racial capitalism" (42) that produces and then codifies and commodifies "difference." Naomi Klein understands neoliberalism as the permanent shift toward normalizing² subcontracting economies. And Roderick Ferguson adds that neoliberalism differentiates, abstracts, and distills so that hegemonic structures may continue to remain fixed; neoliberalism not only identifies the market use of difference (of sex, gender, race, politics), but also manages and organizes difference, finding a placement for it within capital's imagination.³ The gallery space is the economic sphere that facilitates the exchange between social and economic capital. Here, aesthetics become a forceful shield in managing the economic and institutional processes of neoliberal capitalism. It is only in the commercial and finance-driven gallery space that Sierra's projects may persist. In order to interrogate the gallery's aesthetic shield and examine the possibility of decentering his narrative, I reposition Sierra's work as/within timelines of exploitation and global north dominance. I argue that the "exclusion by homage" (Rancière, xxvi) presented in Sierra's gallery performances and photographs is a primary function of neoliberal aesthetics.⁴

Regarding imagination (and by extension, representation), Max Haiven writes that "Neoliberalism is hostile to the radical imagination in unprecedented ways" (104) because "the expansion of the financial imaginary must necessarily come at the expense of the radical imagination" (117). The aesthetic manifestation of neoliberal aesthetics abides by this logic. Because neoliberalism is opposed to radical imagination, neoliberal aestheticians insist that representing the 'reality' of neoliberal capitalism must be done by replicating it. If neoliberal capitalism is the permanent condition of the subcontract of some for the ongoing wealth management of others, neoliberal aesthetics is the philosophy, the violent replication of the subcontract, for the exquisite pleasures of those who profit from the subcontract. The philosophical premise is to proudly produce nothing but the old by insisting on the value of financial and economic replication.

The process of this replication is transferred to outsourced and subcontracted laborers. In "Aestheticizing Risk in Wartime" Jane Blocker⁵ examines the celebration of risk within art and art criticism and draws parallels to contemporary US banking and war culture. She adopts the corporate banking term, "risk transfer" to discuss artists who are celebrated for their dangerous/innovative ideas, but are not bodily involved in the making/destruction of their objects, or are not held accountable for any of its damages. This position of authorship she points out, is dependent on celebration to dissociate risk from damage and to profit from the transfer of risk—mimicking our current financial and political systems. I would extend here that the right to risk, or the recognition of risk taking/risk transfer is dependent on what Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism* theorizes as

racial capitalism. In Santiago Sierra, the risk lands on the skin of black and brown bodies via the tattoo instrument, and the tattoo line is to symbolize the permanence of subcontractor's poverty. Sierra uses bodies as his material—to realize his artistic vision and for his financial and social gains. He manages the transfer of risk to black and brown bodies but receives the credit and profit as the artist. Whether or not the risk comes at the expense of damage and who it might wound continues to remain irrelevant in the banking world as well as in the arts.

Taking Melamed and Ferguson's articulation of neoliberalism, Klein's analysis of neoliberalism's normalization of the subcontract, Haiven's insight into the quarantined conditions of capital's financial imagination, and Blocker's thesis of how success and creativity are defined as risk transfer in finance and the arts, I argue that neoliberal aesthetics is the commitment to reifying the imagination of financial capitalism by denying all other forms of imagination, via a practice that replicates the structure (violence), through the transfer of risk (the process of subcontracting) as representation—under the structure and guise of aesthetic production. In addition, in neoliberal aesthetics, I argue that the body of the other is represented to make the process of violence visible, but the circulation of this racialized hypervisibility exists to normalize and surveil the violence. The racialized body becomes the 'raw material' that labors for and simultaneously is situated as the site for the artist to work through the violence of neoliberal capitalism. I examine Sierra's methodology as one model of neoliberal aesthetics in order to construct a genealogy intertwining western modernist aesthetics and contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Methodology

My material inspection of the *250cm* photographs for sale by the artist and the gallery situate the financial positioning of the piece as one that profits from commodity culture and western narratives of subjecthood even as it proclaims to critique such formations. Before reading what the surface and the image of Sierra's performance has to ideologically and affectively offer, I examine arguments made by contemporary art historians that uphold Sierra's work as instructive and effective projects. I argue that the majority of criticism surrounding Sierra's works have become extensions of his commercial gallery's press statements—the structural shield for this production. Contemporary writings concerning Sierra validate and celebrate his approach to alterity, performance, labor, and the market. The scholars discussed in this article deploy critical theory and Marxist critique to make Sierra's enactments: interesting, radical, exceptional, acceptable. This scholarship serves to uplift and legitimize neoliberal aesthetics, exclusion via homage, alterity as material, and terror situated as performance. I interrogate the field's unaddressed tensions and how it may be fruitful to abandon or boycott⁶ gestures that are operating under the logic and imagination of destructive, neoliberal capitalism.

My model in investigating the ecology of neoliberal aesthetics will be Saidiya Hartman's decree against the ease of circulation of the representation of slavery and suffering. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman explains why she has directed her inquiry towards the politics and power of circulation. She writes,

I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to

in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. (3)

Hartman states that rather than displaying and replicating the representation of violence, she questions the mode of circulations in place. Hartman's critique² of the circulation of slavery is my model and the basis to my questions concerning performance, representation, circulation. It is important to note however, that Hartman's language is specific to the milieu of chattel slavery. This particularly cannot be transferred or appropriated without enacting a similar violence. In this regard, I wish to use Hartman's articulation concerning the circulation of slavery to be the primary center of not just of my argument, but to state that it is the center of all representation and circulation made possible via slavery. The circulation of the 'ravaged slave body' is not the backdrop but the foreground in which representations of suffering and neoliberal aesthetics continue to flourish.

Hartman cautions against the consumption of black suffering that enables our current circulation practices. In this light, questions raised in Black studies become the most useful methodology to foreground and examine globalized neoliberal aesthetics. The framework is:

1. To measure the position and investigate the politics of representation, of the desire for circulation.
2. To analyze the rhetoric in place for circulation, replication.
3. To problematize in each instance, the dynamics between terror and performance, and the audience that make up this spectrum.
4. To press: For whom are such materials/text useful? Who does it discipline, who does it mimic? Who is its subject? Who is the object?
5. Whenever necessary, to halt its circulation.

This is the framework that will guide me to read the desire for circulation.

Framing *250cm* as terror situated as performance I ask, for whom must poverty and racialized violence be representational? For whom is the circulation made pleasurable?

Bodies as Material

The performances I examine are not in traditional spaces of theater and dance. The bodies I speak of are distilled as racialized subcontractors confined to The Artist's photograph, and realized as such by his gallery enactments. The use of bodies as material has roots in all forms of dance, theater and tableaux vivants, so my presentation of Santiago Sierra is not a case study of the absurd or the new, but a recalcitrant candidate in an exceptionalized space that has further raised questions about aesthetic terror and the function of the author. My inspection of Sierra is not to exceptionalize Sierra's business practice, to suggest he is singular in his approach, but to fatigue all other possible readings and celebrations of his work and in so doing develop a form with which to critique neoliberal aesthetics.

In developing this critique of abstraction/materialization of labor and terror, I would like to be aware but not cautious. The art criticism discussed in this article and surrounding Sierra take great pains to avoid discussing race, ethics, labor, class, and focus solely on the vision and rhetoric of the artist. Though I would not like to participate in further developing what Jacques Rancière calls, "...the great narrative of modern times and...the drama of the universal victim" (50) I try with great care to position myself, Sierra, and the laborers as connected to this project during the reading yet disparate in every way possible otherwise—so that I may locate yet not intrude into spaces of silence and their potential.

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The Artist/CEO: Committed to Capital's Imagination

Santiago Sierra is a Spanish artist who has been prolifically working since the 1990s. His work for the last two decades consists of subcontracting people to perform his “pointless tasks,” his abstract readymades. It is important to note that Sierra has never involved his own body as material or labor and that as a policy, when giving interviews, he keeps his face hidden, rendering his physical presence nearly absent.⁸ A brief and telling list of a decade of his work includes:

Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person, May 1998.

250 Cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People, December 1999.

8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes. August, 1999.

24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Paid Workers, July 1999.

3 People Paid to lay Still Inside 3 Boxes During a Party, November 2000.

Ten People Paid to Masturbate, November, 2000.

160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People, December 2000.

Group of Persons Facing a Wall (“performed” by homeless women in London at the Tate), 2002. *The Penetrated* October, 2008 (Sierra).

Sierra's works are un-ironically titled. The titles to his pieces are the explanations. Sans title perhaps, his pieces could be alluring and perhaps even provocative. Sans title, the viewer might experience his work as performance based, absurdist theater, full of special effects. Sierra's pieces in general deal with the same issues, slightly variegated in their visual presentation. It is almost as if he has taken up Alain Badiou's proposal of failure⁹ and is convinced that repetitions will ultimately create a Best Version, the correct proof.

Many art critics have heralded Santiago Sierra as a Marxist artist involved in institutional critique, antagonizing relational aesthetics. Sierra's own interviews and public letters are laced with critiques of capitalism, exploitation, colonialism and Empire.¹⁰ Sierra's work consists of people subcontracted at a symbolic minimum base pay. In one work, homeless women are subcontracted (paid 18 pounds for the amount they might pay for a place to sleep) to stand facing a wall at the Tate Modern. In another, substance-reliant sex workers are subcontracted (paid with heroin) to be tattooed in a gallery; in yet another unemployed laborers are subcontracted at their rate (30 dollars a day) for their backs to be tattooed. Although they are paid at their base and symbolic value, their labor is shifted to the gallery/museum space, and to Sierra. The price of marginality is the price required to *participate* as material in Sierra's art. He makes it clear that his prices differ; some of his pieces boldly display this disparity, such as that while the migrant laborer will make 30 dollars for the photograph, Sierra the artist will collect 20,000–60,000 euros from their sales. Though the subcontractor's labor and their alterity must be displayed, offered, and reproduced ad nauseam, Sierra's photographs are limited to sets, usually of four or ten.¹¹ Many of them enter the secondary market to fetch even higher fees. His subcontractors are paid as raw material, and deliberately not as artists and performers. Sierra does not shield the fact that only he may be compensated as the artist, or more accurately the CEO,

of his gallery production. In the economic structure of art, Santiago Sierra makes it clear—both as his critique and as the premise of his artistic production—that he is the only one selected to receive the artist commissions and paycheck (Bishop 70). With every new idea and commissioned performance he is able to further establish his brand and career, stabilizing his future commissions and projects. For their minimum necessities (a day's wage, a place to sleep), his subcontractors carry his risk and become rebranded as his art.

Viewing the black and white photograph from *250 Cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, I notice how the tattooed line travels straight¹² but lands on a different place on every body. How fresh the line stands—almost leveled and fake (oh the desired and profitable pranks!). In the documentation some of the men wear caps and almost all of them have belts. They are all facing the wall, backs bare, away from the camera. There is an image of a man being tattooed and the side of his face is lined—so he can either be grinning or grimacing. All the heads appear to be “[B]owed in submission” (Kenning 438), except one, in all the images. In the first image, there is a young man in a cap who looks to his side, almost as if he is checking on the bodies next to him. He could be speaking to the man next to him, as their heads are down but slightly tilted. In the second image the one head not facing down is the young man on the very right. He looks up, almost as if he notices the camera. He is the sixth person in line so there is no one to his right—though he looks. Everybody in the photograph appears to be young, thin, and black and brown.

This tattoo line is 6 backs long. It is not a kilometer not because it would be impossible to find 100,000 more bodies *willing* to be tattooed, but because then it wouldn't be rare—it couldn't be contained as limited editions of four and because then, what we would see is the premise of a union, rather than the “performance” of Sierra's six. In every conceivable angle, *250cm* operates under the gallery culture notion of manufactured scarcity. The performers are few, the scene is rare, the photograph (the photograph!) is editioned.

The subcontractors are without names, without particularity—they are there because the present and future viewers are never supposed to know who they are. They were hired because they were the six that could not find other employment that particular day. They were hired because they were *willing*. They were hired because they had backs, interpreted as smooth and blank by a contemporary artist from the global north. And the tattoo line traced them as if they were his surface. In Sierra's gallery catalogue this point is emphasized. Eckhard Schneider writes, “[F]or the tattoo he does not use some literary or decorative motif but the symbol of modern art, the unrepresentational line” (28). The straight line, more than any other device, exists to signify its connection to the tradition of painting in western modern art. In this composition it should not surprise that many contemporary artists have routinely described these “pieces” as Sierra's “drawings”—as in, the bodies are his canvas, the tattoo line on them his aesthetic creation, his linkage to the tradition of modern aesthetics.

The tattoo line, according to Sierra and his catalogue text, oscillates between the representation of aesthetic production, and the representation of social constraints. Of the line and professing his commitment to replicating and upholding the logic of financial capitalism Sierra comments, “A person without money has no dignity...The tattoo is not the problem....The problem is the existence of social conditions that allow me to make this work” (Nelson 127). The line serves as its own shield—it is a creation with so many origins—it can never be accountable. The line is created by modern art, the line is created because of social conditions, the line is created inside the gallery, the line exists according to the blueprint of the present. The line was constructed as an act of permanence. The line can be constructed inside the gallery but cannot be removed the same.

The documentation notes that the enactment of the *250cm* line took place in Cuba. Art writer Heidi Kellett insinuates that Sierra “performing” this in communist Cuba is of interest. She argues that it reveals how communist states, though supposedly devoid of capitalism, still produce economic devastation—an ahistorical, imperial reading in need of critical attention. More important than the communist framing, *250cm* circulates outside of its original context; the limited-edition photographs of *250cm* are sold within a capitalist art market. Additionally, Sierra himself declares that in his practice he only uses methodologies from capitalism, which either means that he believes that he is the figure of capitalism wherever he goes, so it matters not that he is in Cuba, Italy, or England—context is irrelevant—or his projects make place, history, irrelevant by violently flattening their particularities for the sake of aesthetic creation and consumption.

Grace Hong’s inspection of US migrant labor and the problem of visibility becomes a useful framework when thinking about the labor and spatial logic of global north gallery systems. Hong and Saskia Sassen have argued that the tenor of post-Ford US labor practices is to hold pockets of the global south within the global north. This positioning and maintenance of the ‘pocket’ –a spatial positioning— of the global south in the global north can be reframed to view *250cm*. The unnamed “unemployed men” enter the gallery space (situated by global north gallery systems) to remain arrested as such. In fact, *250cm* wishes to present that wherever “they” go, the labor logic applied to the economic south must follow. The positionality of our bodies enforce our economic value through space. The distilment of the pockets of the global south, captured as aesthetic objects for the consumption of the global north reveals the artifice of this installment— and reveals its hostility to radical imaginations and the policing function of contemporary, commercial art making.

The *250cm* tattoo line and the neoliberal economic logic of this performance insists that as surface objects the subcontractors are interchangeable. Whether they are in the gallery or “outside” they are migrant, they are laborers. They are fixed yet interchangeable, permanently subcontracted. Sierra hires them to re-represent this reality for the unspecified yet clearly classed gallery viewer. And in the gallery space the visibility of neoliberal aesthetics is treated as the remedy to global injustice. The logic says: *it is because we cannot see* and presents the viewer the opportunity to surveil, commodify, exploit the body and purchase the representation of the other.

Visibility, however, is as fraught as invisibility. Grace Hong has argued that women of color feminist frameworks are “[N]ot suggest[ing] visibility as an easy remedy for the condition of invisibility, but [are] imply[ing] a dialectical relationship between the two. In other words, for women of color feminist practice, visibility is a rupture, an impossible articulation” (xxviii). This is particularly salient in thinking about visibility in *250cm*. In *250cm*, Sierra visually replicates the conditions of economic devastation. Visibility *for* the subcontracted becomes an “impossible articulation,” each attempt only clarifying the distance between the recognized subject, and his chosen objects. In this vein Hong argues against mediated and immediate visibility as somehow solving the problems of conditioned and practiced invisibility. Hong cites Mitsuye Yamada who argues, “[I]nvisibility is an unnatural disaster,” to extend that, “so too, is visibility unnatural; it is also a kind of violence...visibility is not inclusion, but surveillance” (xxviii). The unnamed bodies in the image of *250cm* amplify the invisible visibility maintained through the surveillance of commodified, gallery representation.

Sierra explains his commitment to this fixity, “I do not use any methods distinct from capitalism, since there is no such alternative methodology and I do not caricature capitalism for I consider it a kind of ‘eternal damnation’ inflicted on humankind...I agree with you when you define them [the bodies he subcontracts] as those ‘who are already

victims” (Matt 315). Sierra’s understanding of capitalism is dehistoricizing and defensive. For Sierra, subcontracting, surveillance, policing, exploitation, oppression and exclusion are essential strains of neoliberal capitalism because they are the only methods of art available. Sierra repeats his commitment to uphold neoliberalism’s financial imagination, and its current market values, “There is no alternative to this systems, [sic] or way to dodge it, change it, or question it” (Echeverría 103). Sierra insists again and again against anything other than the imagination, procedures and structures of neoliberal capitalism. As a producer of neoliberal aesthetics, he insists that the role of an artist is to uphold and replicate its violence. Capitalism has been eternal—there is no need or reason to remember history otherwise or imagine future impossibilities. A convenient interpretation for a successful, contemporary capitalist.

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The Ecology of the Market

Andrea Fraser describes the landscape of museum/gallery board members, owners—those with purchasing powers and vested interests. She writes,

We all know that the art field is the site of enormous concentrations of wealth and power. Museums are the wealthiest institutions in the world if we calculate their assets. *Art objects are far and away the most highly valued objects in the world, rendering the art market a kind of economic freak show...* Museums are also directly linked to powerful political interests. And at this point there can be no doubt that the art market and museum building boom of the past decade was fueled by the very same individuals who drove the stock and real estate markets to dizzy heights with unsustainable if not fraudulent financial tactics—tactics that contributed to dramatic increases in social inequality in the past ten years and have now resulted in global economic collapse. *These are our patrons.* [Emphases Mine].

Fraser makes these statements to conclude that institutional critique—the aesthetic form she’s most closely associated with and as it currently stands—is not possible. What is critique (and how effective could it be?) if it’s what the patron has ordered? What is institutional critique for the patrons of the global economic collapse? Fraser, Chin-Tao Wu and Gregory Sholette have pointed to how fluidity exists between stock portfolios and art portfolios; museums are sites of old, colonial power. Purchasing power readily applies to the arts—as witnessed by China’s shove into the top of the art and antiquities market (BBC). These economic concerns should be at the center of our aesthetic discussions. Artists as they are currently professionalized and situated, cannot move away from museums and patrons, and therefore settle into the role of the manager of risk, the CEO.

The relationship between finance and aesthetics, between the finance sector and the aesthetic production is not the product of accidental, unfortunate circumstance—it’s a procedural relationship. Linking the affective directly to the financial, Max Haiven suggests it may be more fruitful to configure the most recent financial meltdown not as a catastrophe of events, but a crisis¹³ in the imagination of capital. If we configure finance to be capital’s imagination (where it mutates, disseminates, circulates most expediently), then a crisis within finance is the manifestation of a limit—however momentarily—being reached. In an abstract thought experiment, the failure of finance as a Marxist potential is provocative and alluring. Though Haiven notes¹⁴ that such crises/limits have deep

racialized consequences, this note does not configure in the larger construction of his argument. Race however as Melamed and Ferguson have described, is not the minor facet, but foundation and the organizational catalyst in the imagination and function of neoliberal capitalism. For this reason, Haiven's usage of the terms "crisis" and his extension of Marx's interest in what Haiven identifies as imagination are of particular importance, as they simultaneously parallel and critique the function of "terror" and "performance." In Sierra's oeuvre and *250cm* in particular, concrete systems are abstracted and imagined through the exploitation of black and brown bodies, an act that is believed to bare capital's crisis. Sierra's thesis seems to be that the terror of capital might become concretized via the imagery of racialized abjection; but in the representation of this schema, the black and brown bodies must remain silent, turned away, vague.

Currently, gallery circulated art forms do not exist outside of finance. I want to stress here explicitly that Sierra's photographs, according to the rankings of gallery/museum objects are normatively priced. They are not the most valuable objects in the world, they have not yet broken auction records. The current price point of 20-120,000 euros is mid-range and reasonable for the financial, 'liquid modern'¹⁵ class. It is not the price point of the selling photograph that is to cause the viewer shock: the sale price is valued by the artist's successful risk transfer. The value of the enactment is based on the artist having gotten subcontractors to be tattooed for 30 dollars, and having left with documentation to sell. This market is without regulation and dictates that Sierra's prices are free to roam according to the desires of its buyers, seekers, investors, patrons. In fact, the prices move according to the market's interest in representations of (and replications of) neoliberal capitalism. Mirroring the financial sector, deregulation becomes the site of pure freedom and the secondary site of the imagination of capital. And it is at this site—this site of pure unregulated financial freedom—where Sierra actualizes his performances of neoliberal capitalism, replicating the site of terror.

Part of the hope in Sierra's works is that deregulation will lead to its own imaginative crisis. This is the dream that through replication of violence and deregulation the corporation/capital will ultimately crush into itself. This is the hope of those that the margins have yet to crush: the one constructed to clearly exclude those who sit at the center of damage. Additionally *250cm* has only produced more repetitions of the same. In this regards, Sierra's practice in *250cm* is, the void, loyal to reproducing the imagination of capital alone. *250cm* is an enactment that reifies exploitation: but this reification only replicates the violence of racial capitalism, this replication cannot destroy it. What does it mean then, when the limit can be reached, yet nothing but repetitions follow? What does it mean when this replication is the one most desired by galleries, museums and their patrons? A project of aesthetic production that rhetorically espouses an 'alternative,' leftist project while systematically deploying every exploitative tool available —this is the very project and circulation system that as Hartman and Blocker suggested, we must decide to reject, boycott, halt.

In regards to how artists of the 1960s dealt with the market, art historian Jane Blocker posits that post modernism and particularly performance art were mobilized to shift away from the dominating presence of market. She argues that the crisis of the market in art, of art's fixation in the market, pressed the minds of artists and art historians alike. Concerning this anxiety she writes,

Doing performance in the sixties and seventies was one means for artists to liberate themselves from degraded artistic practices and institutions: from the gallery system, from the object, from commodity, from the pursuit of aesthetic purity, from the tired tradition of painting... (14).

This management of the implications, however, was not a radical break. It replicated similar market power dynamics that previous mediums, such as photography and painting, had already embodied. And in extending the presence of the visual art market, Blocker argues that the performers—such as Vito Acconci, Yves Klein, Gary Hill and others—enacted a “feminized position,” and worked through and represented a “hoped-for” (15) body—a normatively-desired body. The desire to move away from the market did not produce a space away from the gendered, sexualized, and bodily constraints of market desires. In this narrative of the history of performance art, Sierra goes against traditional strains of performance by refusing to display his body—what Blocker might identify as a rejection of the feminized position—and by refusing to display the “hoped-for body.” It is in this terrain that commentators and gallerists have lauded Sierra’s gestures: they read Sierra as working against the strictures of performance art, and this opposition, his “against” becomes read as: subversive, marxist.

Sierra’s *250cm* attempts to demonstrate: the body removed from hope is the racialized body, the racialized body is the body filled by abjection and suffering. What does it mean when white male artists enact the body against hope through the conditions of the subcontract in perpetuation for commodity fetishism? The labor of the body removed from hope becomes displaced, transferred, outsourced. Race becomes the material in constructing the contrarian performance. The racialized body is surveilled, excluded, anonymous and at the same time serves as the site of value from which the artist creates, peddles, and profits. And here the fissures of neoliberal aesthetics are found: to be additive via humiliation (especially within the terrains of the market) is the very definition of multiculturalism in service of white supremacy. To be additive means difference will quickly or eventually be commodified and so by the logic of neoliberalism, to be additive is most laudatory.

As Sierra’s body is outside the performance but he profits from the documentation, Sierra’s role in these enactments is as the distributor of risk, the manager of terror. Who is at the receiving end of this management? In regards to this question, Grant Kester, like Hartman, calls for scholars to examine the circulation processes in place. He writes, “[The] writing on Sierra’s work continues to focus on its reception in the gallery by an imaginary viewer, while neglecting entirely the actual forms of reception and performative interaction set in motion during its commercial after-life.” Utilizing an interview of Sierra’s New York based art dealer, Kester argues that performance within self-legitimized “high art” institutions can never be removed from the market. The performance of visual art—in its early construct described by Blocker, or its neoliberal rendition in Sierra’s oeuvre—falls in line with the same market logic of production and circulation.

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Lessons for whom? Replications made by whom?

The proletarian is someone *who has only one thing to do*—they make the revolution—and who *cannot not do that* because of what he is.
—Jacques Rancière on Marxism

Sierra, abiding by the institutions and structures he supposedly critiques, centers the position of the manager/CEO. The pleasure for the patron and its periphery class stems from the insistence to replicate and represent neoliberal capitalism. The practice of hiring laborers at an impossible minimum has been thoroughly theorized by western political economists. In *Capital, Volume 1*, under “The Working Day,” Karl Marx goes into great detail concerning the exploitations contained in the concept and operation of the working day and wages. He documents how children worked eighteen-hour days and women in sewing shops worked without sleep in order to create dresses for the new capitalists and

their strange affairs. Ten- to twelve-hour days were normal and proletarians were expected to work throughout the night. Individuals who resisted such employment laws were immediately dismissed and replaced with laborers who would voice no complaints (223). Marx argues that time is the material removed from the laborers in a working-day. However, Marx posits that laborers—while alienated from their labor—remain acutely attuned to the processes of labor extraction. It is not the laborer, experienced with these forms, who is unaware of the processes of labor extraction. If Sierra's work attempts to elucidate the material realities of contemporary capitalism, for whom is this process alien? It is not the proletariat that needs to be taught about the oppressive violence of neoliberal capitalism. *250cm* is an image of alterity, for the pleasures of the global north capitalists.

When probed on his practice of labor extraction, especially in terms of the subcontract he offers Sierra has responded,

Paying more than what they expect, or in a way that suits my conscience, is useless...That would suggest that I'm a good guy and that I did my bit towards saving these souls. Ridiculous! If I can find someone prepared to hold up a wall for 65 Euros, *I'd be showing you a true fact*. If I pay double that, I'd be showing my *generosity*.¹⁶ [Emphasis Mine]

There are many anomalies in this statement. First, it might be true to say that Sierra is upholding the abstraction of labor power or the arbitrary fiction of the wage system within his subcontract, but a true fact? A true fact of what? Secondly, Sierra admits that wage negotiations are affective. Paying "more" than the crass, reduced, barest minimum might be beneficial (and possible) to and for both parties. However, according to Sierra, the subcontract must end via the metaphors of punishment, lived violence and artistic commitments. Sierra's "true fact" is an assertion validating his subcontract, particularly to those vested in purchasing the documentation of his exchanges. Sierra's insertion of "true fact" implies a binary, or an excluded, rejected category. Is the opposition to true facts their fictions? And are the ideological relations of capitalism (meritocracy, the moral righteousness of proletariat-bourgeois relations) not also fiction? Fiction, rather than true fact, is a much better word to describe our wage system, and Sierra's oeuvre. Based on the fiction of wage negotiations and the terms of the subcontract, the wealthy and the global north consumer are provided ways to imagine the end of capitalism—and their central role in this scenario. The enactments of his subcontracts and the rationale for them offer the customer: 1. revolution as fiction 2. the abjection of the present. Both functions actually exist to confirm the power of the artist's subcontracts.

250cm hones in on presenting the commodification of orthodox Marxism, as well as a neoliberal understanding of revolution. Marx describes in "Rent of Land" concerning tenant farmers, "Hence a section of this class, too, is completely ruined. Eventually wages, which have already been reduced to a minimum, must be reduced yet further, to meet the new competition. This then necessarily leads to revolution" (105). While wage negotiations are vital, essential, and ongoing, neoliberal capitalism and the function of the subcontract displays the limits of wage-based revolutions. The narrative of *250cm* is: the only role capitalists (Sierra, art, gallery culture) can play is to reveal/enforce/replicate the bare minimum in order to trigger the revolution. This scenario privileges the bourgeois subject, the exceptional artist, as the instigator of new and better things to come. Additionally, as wages are controlled by multinational corporations that single-handedly keep the high art market sector alive,¹⁷ the formula of baring the subcontract to lead to a revolution is one that is devoted to privileging the wealthy customer. This revolution fantasy focuses on the awareness of the wealthy patron—it prioritizes their consciousness and existence as leaders and liberators.

250cm fixes the representation of economic devastation to circulate amongst only the wealthy. The exploitative taste of upper-class privatizes the representation of global poverty. Sierra emphasizes wage labor, situating it so that the problem with capitalism is the distance between wages, rather than the capitalist structures of subcontracting and racialized economic fixity. This replication insists that the global north can negotiate its way out of this mess—if wages were raised, all would be okay? This wage-based critique is neither the end of white supremacy nor the destruction of capitalism, but is the material for the re-representation, replication of neoliberal capitalism.

Of such contradictory understandings of labor and value, wage and abstraction, Marx articulates, “Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question. Or if you want to hold on to your abstraction, then be consistent and if you think of man and nature as non-existent, then think of yourself as non-existence, for you too are surely nature and man (145).” If capital is accumulated abstracted labor, and labor can be accumulated because “...money knows no master” (102), then there should be no differentiation between the proletariat’s abstracted labor, and the capital gains from the capitalist. If the world really only contained abstracted labor then the world would equally belong to no one—injustice is in the way that only some labor has been abstracted through our fictionalization that some things can become property and some labor subcontracted. A more “true fact” than Sierra’s embrace of fictitious capitalism would be a world filled with capital and labor, and no masters.

However, Sierra declares that he is in charge of the negotiations, and therefore of the fictions and ultimately the performances. He fully controls the process of compensation and the spectrum of wage labor. It is because he is bestowed this managerial responsibility that he must enact the full facts of neoliberal capitalism; *250cm* is the commitment to enacting this fictional scheme instead of fictionally altering it. Sierra, the capitalist, the CEO of his artist corporation, will replicate these roles to teach viewers about the horrors of neoliberalism, poverty and marginalization. Neoliberal capitalism must be replicated—outside and inside the gallery space—in order to ‘teach’ and ‘show’ those realities to the wealthy.¹⁸

Before jumping further I would like to retrace the pejorative placement of “generosity” in such “art” practice. Is it truly generosity to “pay more”? How and why does this particular affect and emotion erupt in the site of economic negotiations?¹⁹ I will pair Sierra’s Marxist Public Relations and his concept of wage-labor (generosity) with Marx’s personification of a laborer amidst the process of wage negotiation:

You pay me for one day’s labour-power, whilst you use that of 3 days. That is against our contract and the law of exchanges. I demand, therefore, a working-day of normal length, and *I demand it without any appeal to your heart, for in money matters sentiment is out of place*. You may be a model citizen...but the thing that you represent face to face with me has no heart in its breast. That which seems to throb there is my own heart-beating. I demand the normal working-day because I, like every other seller, demand the value of my commodity. (225) [Emphasis Mine]

Payment for labor power is not an issue of generosity and expectation, but an issue that acknowledges the mode of production. Marx argues that the extraction and exploitation of capitalism resides in the vulnerability of the contract to the affective whims of capitalists. Marx states that it is through making the discourse of payment affective that the value of labor power and value of the work are refused by capitalists; the affective conditions of the contract are fundamentally exploitative and violent. The violence is the ability to privilege one’s affect over the work and life of another, according to state and

institutional guidelines: the contract stipulates that the worker labors for three days, but the capitalist may pay for one. Marxism works to destroy the artifice of this relationship—to halt the continuation of fictitious capital as everlasting and correct.

In addition, Marx argues that money does not represent value. Haiven points out that for Marx, “Money is not a measure of actually existing labor power, but a measure of *anticipated* labor power to yet be mobilized toward the production of commodities” (111). Money symbolizes that which is “already anticipatory and speculative” (111)—negotiations for money are not about the exchange of labor power, but are about the exchange of projected value. Sierra’s lump sums for his subcontracts (30 dollars, 120,000 lire, 18 pounds, 65 euros) assess value by symbolizing desperation.

To insist that wage be affective and the money of some symbolize value is the logic of capitalism and neoliberal capitalism. These are symbolic sums: a night at a hostel, the bare minimum for a day’s work, heroin. They are symbolic, and at the same time are necessities, needed for survival by marginalized and yet dominant communities. Sierra insists that his sum is purposefully base, to reveal how the subcontractors operate as the excesses of capital and outside of the symbolic activity of anticipation as they are unable to demand *money* or are unable to be conceived as *deserving* more. And in this line of reasoning, Sierra’s price points of 20,000-120,000 euros exist because he is not playing within the threshold of speculative economies, but is a manager of them. Sierra’s payment is not a symbolic sum (one mortgage payment, a weekly food stipend, a year’s clothing allowance) as his work is *desired* and *anticipated*. The amount of money he will be paid secures his managerial positioning.

Haiven argues, “[Money] colonizes the future, replacing the limitless potential of social cooperation with the limitless accumulation of capital” (101). Sierra’s usage of money in his project only has one function: to quarantine poverty into the future. Sierra’s understanding of subcontract concludes that the status quo of exploitation must persist as representation. The status quo must be represented ad nauseam as aesthetic object to highlight this claim. For Sierra, commercial art objects and their transactions best reflect the power dynamics of capitalism—even as fiction, they cannot distort, rupture, reverse, splinter, create, process. Sierra responds that he does not believe in change²⁰ or possibility, and that art is a re-presentation of reality, but not the “possibility of change.” One can deduce from this rationale that serious art is the advertisement of the status quo.

Princeton University Art Museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, Kelly Baum, agrees that it is the fixation of the status quo that makes Sierra’s work interesting. Of the *Submission* series displayed at the university, she writes that she thinks of them as a performance of the speech act, articulating, “These subject positions (whether as perpetrator or victims), are not given beforehand, but are constituted in the very act of enunciation.” Baum writes that Sierra’s works are without “punctual resolutions” but filled with “incisive exploration.” Curator Baum is comfortable with and intrigued by Sierra’s conceptualization of bodies as raw material and the speech act’s power to assist in this refashioning of the status quo of exploitation and violence. Baum confirms that Sierra, just like the institutions and structures he supposedly critiques, produces nothing other than exploitation.

250cm works to turn economic desperation and devastation into a performance for the global north consumer. Utilizing the language of wage and choice, it asks subjects of economic devastation to display the depths of their abjection. This is not a performance, it is the dominator’s enactment of pleasure via violence. Violence cannot be performed, it is sanctioned, it is embodied, it is forced and instilled. The title, the scenario, and the replication exist to reinforce for consumers: that we are not the performer, that Sierra is

the political artist, and that neoliberal capitalism can be contained to a photograph, a gallery space. The explicit argument of *250cm* for the viewer is: *you would never stand in this line, you would never be tattooed for 30 dollars, you would never take off your shirt, turn your head away to admit how little power you really have. You are not my commodity*—feel the distance from the poor, and purchase the photograph. *250cm* reasons that the space of official performance is an economic space. It is fraught with the tensions and exploitation of neoliberal capitalism—and refuses to imagine otherwise.

*

The Aesthetic Shield: Normalizing Risk Transfer via Marxist Public Relations

Sierra, who doubts that as an artist he has the capacity to transform himself into a threat, has arrived with his NO at an aesthetic of *zero hope*”
—from Santiago Sierra: NO GLOBAL TOUR

God didn't die, he was transformed into money.
—Giorgio Agamben, interview with Peppe Savà

I posit that critical and institutionalized commentary on Sierra's works has served to circulate the processes of risk transfer without examining the desire for its circulation. As a result, the critiques offered by contemporary art historians defend Sierra's profits, serving as a theoretical shield for work such as *250cm* to continue to circulate.

In “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” concerning Sierra's work art historian Claire Bishop has written,

The work of Hirschhorn and Sierra is *better art* not simply for *being better politics*... *Their work* acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art... and subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society. The model of subjectivity that underpins *their practice* is not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux. (79) [Emphases mine]

Here Bishop explicitly reads Sierra's enactments as superior because of its politics. The politics of the pieces, if we are to take Santiago Sierra's rhetoric at face value, is the recapitulation of capitalist methodology as art. As I've explored, however, this practice is one that I've described to be the tenet of neoliberal aesthetics.

Bishop fully credits Sierra as the figure of work. It is his work that emphasizes the limitations of art the name, his work that leads to scrutinize the distance between art and society, and most ironically: his work that elucidates the fictional constructions of universal subjecthood (“constant flux” — does this mean the rich get to play with the poor or that the poor get to trample²¹ the rich?). There is no discussion of how the described art is immaterial and managerial, stated to be reenactments of capitalist structures. In this configuration, Bishop subsumes Sierra's subcontracted bodies as his work—their labor becomes his ingenuity, their alterity his material. As modeled by and folded into Sierra, Bishop cannot credit the subcontracted laborers, normalizing the process of risk transfer and their current labor conditions.

Continuing her discussion of Hirschhorn and Sierra in *October*, Bishop explains,

These artists set up “*relationships*” that *emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation* in their art, but do so *without collapsing these relationships into the work's content*. The relations produced by their performances and installations are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging...An

integral part of this tension is the introduction of *collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds*, which in turn serves to challenge contemporary art's self-perception as a domain that embraces other social and political structures.
(70) [Emphasis mine]

There is much rhetorical fluidity in this passage, and it is important to configure and connect Bishop's subject/object/verb usage in order to explore the relations and ideas that Bishop is at risk of collapsing. In order to gauge the possibilities and their connections, I will attempt to define Bishop's description of Sierra's *work* and *practice*:

"Relationships"

- = The financial relationship between Sierra and his subcontractors
- = The financial and cultural relationship between Sierra (extensions of his persona) and gallery viewers
- = The financial relationships and cultural capital connections between Sierra and his gallery team, PR
- = The financial relationships between the gallery and its collectors

"Emphasize dialogue and negotiation"

- = Between Sierra and his subcontractors: Sierra exclaims that he will pay 30 dollars for 6 bare backs. Viewers are not provided with a transcription of the dialogue, the exchange or any notion of a verbal response, we are to assume that since the documentation for the event existed, that Sierra's commandment was executed and the negotiation worked in his favor.
- = Between Sierra and gallery viewers: Sierra remains anonymous, so it's unclear what the dialogue or negotiation between his viewers and his 'work' could be.
- = Between Sierra and his gallery: Sierra proclaims to only use methodologies found in capitalism. His gallery and art historians consistently inform us of how to read the Marxist potential in his work, and of his "better" politics.
- = Between the gallery and collectors: Gallery statements utilize the language provided by art historians to discuss the work with collectors.

"Without collapsing these relationships into the work's content"

- = here Bishop explicitly distances Sierra's 'work' from the transfer of risk, from the subcontracted bodies surveilled to enact them.

Key Phrase

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: Exploitation to create unease rather than belonging? The rich subcontracting the poor as the new standard for art diversity? The dynamics of oppression being a form of collaboration?

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: What is the objective here? So that the gallery space might have some 'diversity'?

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: How do the poor collaborate with the wealthy, in Marxian terms? What is collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds—in Marxian terms?

collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds: It's unclear and at the same time crystallizing why Sierra's subcontractors are consistently called "collaborators" "participants" and "volunteers."²²

Bishop states that, "Sierra pays others to do work for which he gets paid, and in turn he is exploited by galleries, dealers, and collectors" (71). Any reference to exploitation is only mentioned here, and in relation to Sierra's relationship with his galleries and dealers. Bishop acknowledges the "exploitative" dynamic between Sierra and his management team, but insists that his subcontractors are "collaborators." I am interested to know what

and how Sierra's subcontractors may be collaborating for and volunteering in. Are the men in *250cm* collaborators, as their bodies *offer* and *authenticate* the signifier of terror in a documented "performance" about poverty and abjection conceived by a global north subject? Are they collaborators in the sense that neoliberal capitalism has so effectively extracted their power to negotiate their labor, that they are "free" to be objects in the management of base value? Are they collaborators because they have become uniformed as "material"? Are the women in *Group of Persons Facing a Wall* collaborators because they needed a place a sleep? Are these women collaborators because Sierra saw in them the value of replicating and representing the failures of the state, the excesses and triumphs of neoliberal capitalism? Or are they collaborators because their economic and racial positions could be used as raw material by an Artist?

I do not ask such questions to remove agency or subjecthood from Sierra's subcontractors but to suggest that such depictions—in both the performance and the circulation of reproductions—require the subcontractors to be without names, value, agency, or subjecthood. They are required to be without particularity yet racially marked. As illustrated by Grace Hong, and by Gayatri Spivak, rendering visibility can also be an act of surveillance, and the "benevolence" of representation the foundational violence of the colonial imagination.

However, the art criticism around Sierra's work normalizes the process of risk transfer and attempts to textually subsume the violence of neoliberal aesthetics. Artist and writer Coco Fusco's description of Sierra's project is similar to Bishop's. Fusco details Mexico's post NAFTA landscape: in an economy drenched in the corruption of neoliberal capitalism, a culture milieu populated by artists who are "vampires of misery" (64) Fusco elevates the work of Sierra as "stand[ing] out as countervailing forces" (64). From this context she compares his work to SEMEFO (Forensic Medical Service) and the Electronic Disturbance Theater²³—as "offer(ing) key critical visions of the social and political situation of the country [Mexico]" (64). Fusco extends that Sierra "*calls upon the services* of others and makes a public display of their work" (65, emphasis in original). She writes,

His pieces have taken place in alternative spaces, galleries, and museums. He *purposely selects or offers employment* to individuals from the most marginalized sectors of the cities in which he works...The actions Sierra requests others to perform are repetitive, often nonsensical, and even humiliating. (65) [Emphasis mine]

Once again, there is obfuscation between work, labor and exploitation. To *offer employment*—this is quite a euphemism. Sierra's pay system is structured to humiliate only those that accept its terms. Even if one is to account for the notion that all work under management is tedious and humiliating, employment suggests a contractual exchange, with the notion of ongoing terms and agreements recognized both by the employer, the laborer, and state. In this way, Fusco's euphemism "offer employment" is similar to Bishop's usage of "collaborator" which evades the violent conditions of the subcontract: the economic terms most removed from accountability, claims or any considerations for the ongoing life of the laboring body.

Similarly to Bishop, Fusco echoes that, "Sierra seeks to shock, not as a flip gesture but as a form of institutional critique detonated by the breaking social taboos" (66)—a claim that effectively excuses Sierra from ethical responsibility for his business practices. Fusco then goes on to state that while Sierra is white, those who have called him exploitative are usually from Mexico's wealthiest families, implying that his critics have no ethos to critique his work. The juxtaposition between Sierra's whiteness and the wealth of Sierra's

critics suggest that the two forces are mutually exclusive: that Sierra might not belong in the wealth bracket of this “critical” class, or that the critical class is exempt from the privileges of whiteness.

After silencing potential criticism surrounding his work, Fusco repeats that, “Sierra’s work, on the other hand, foregrounds desperation and futility, the gap between rich and poor, the constant humiliation to which the needy are subjected, and the discretionary power of those with even a modicum of wealth” (67). Fusco describes *Persons Remunerated for Cleaning Shoes of Attendees to an Opening Without Their Consent*, a “performance” where an 11-year-old boy who cleaned shoes at the subway was brought into a gallery to perform this task to attending gallery goers, as well as *Santiago Sierra Invites You for a Drink*, where “international art tourists” were invited to sit on wooden benches that functioned as temporary coffins for the bodies of sex workers, who were paid 30 dollars to remain hidden inside of them, and describing *250cm* Fusco then asserts that “[H]aving had the opportunity to speak to the participants, I do not come away with the impression that they see themselves as exploited” (69). Yet the word “participants” is unspecified. In this current construction, participants could either be the subcontracted laborers, the gallery-goers, the gallerists, or Sierra. Fusco’s insertion is a paradox. If the “participants” who are being paid 30 dollars to be tattooed, concealed, humiliated, and the “participants” attending the galleries, parties, and festivities all proclaim not to feel exploited, then for whom does “Sierra bring the power dynamics into focus” (67)? The witnesses of the photographic documentation of the event, the buyers, the audiences we have yet to hear from? If no one feels the weight of exploitation how is “desperation” “foreground[ed]”? Isn’t the function of Sierra’s enactments to replicate humiliation, desperation, and exploitation so that the gallery goer might be faced with Sierra’s understanding of “true facts”? If exploitation is not felt, critiqued, and rectified on site, how else is power transmitted? Fusco defends Sierra’s project as un-exploitative for the participants, and ultimately normalizes the discourse of risk transfer. In the process Fusco deflates her own theory about how Sierra’s works deal with desperation, power dynamics, and institutional critique. In the process of defending Sierra’s critical project (and perhaps his ethics), Fusco ultimately demonstrates that the *dynamics* of power did not play out to those at his site. Such conclusions raise serious questions as to whether these works need to be enacted at all.

By Fusco, Bishop, and Baum, Sierra’s works are labeled as radical explorations of power. His 2012 Lisson gallery retrospective was titled, “Santiago Sierra: Dedicated to the Workers and Unemployed.” Part of the public relations (PR) statement for the retrospective reads, “Eschewing notions of the politically correct, Sierra forces us to question the commodification of life, exposing and challenging the structures of power that operate in society” (Lisson). Such statements—from art historians to gallerist alike—are the general tenor of how his projects circulate.

Santiago Sierra is the cutting edge of contemporary art and institutional critique—this is the press release statement. Sierra’s rhetoric reflects this sentiment. When interviewed about his projects he states,

We First-Worlders and, above all, the world of culture, have no idea how grim and deep this issue [global poverty] is. We usually think it has been settled or mitigated...But all you need to do is take a flight to Manila or Medellin to see the collateral damage of our option. When you migrate the other way around, the feeling of being a dominator—as you put it—never leaves your mind.

Sierra acknowledges his position as the dominator—he makes art from this space. When awarded for these gestures, he is lauded for rejecting them. When Sierra was announced

to receive Spain's highest aesthetic award, the "Spanish National Prize for Visual Arts" in 2010, Sierra promptly released a statement of rejection for the prize. He declared,

I wish to make clear, now, that art has given me freedom, which I am not ready to give up. Consequently, my common sense obliges me to reject this prize. This prize exploits the prestige of its winner for the benefit of the state. A state that is desperate for legitimacy, given its contempt for its mandate to work for the common good no matter which party occupies the office. A state that participates in crazy wars in alliance with a criminal empire. A state that happily gives away public money to the banks. A state committed to dismantling the welfare state for the benefit of a local and international minority. The state is not for all of us. The state is for you and your friends. Therefore, do not count me among them, for I am a serious artist. No, sirs, No²⁴, Global Tour."²⁵ (Futura)

Santiago Sierra
NO (Police) 2011
B&W photograph, lambda print on dibond, wooden frame and plexiglass
161 x 257 cm (framed)
ed. 3 of 3
SIEI10003-3
EUR 35,000.00

Santiago Sierra
NO Global Tour 2011
HD 1080 and 35 mm, black and white film
Running time 2:03:27
ed. 1 of 411 ap
SIEI10008-1
EUR 120,000.00

Sierra has stated of the project, "People who are actively fighting against the system need images, and we, artists, must provide them with them. This 'No' is made for all who are fed up with injustice, domination, censorship, and oppression" (Sierra). "No" was a campaign documented via photography and video, and then sold via his gallery representative, Lisson. While his campaign was not able to effectively end capitalism, his rejection of the award and subsequent sale of the documentation will make Sierra a more wealthy individual.

One could say much more about his ethos to demonize the public state while in collaboration with privately operated cultural institutions and its wealthy benefactors. In this statement Sierra implies the function of a serious artist is to be working with private galleries and museums instead of the state. And how will Sierra provide the images we need to fight empire, utilizing only the tools given to him by capitalism? I believe Santiago Sierra stated that he will give us images, replicated with the violence of capitalism, in hopes that capitalism be demolished at some point by such representations: Neoliberal Aesthetics.

This is one among many examples that reveals the layers to neoliberal aesthetics: to insistently reproduce neoliberal capitalism; to replicate the violence of capitalism, particularly through the abjection of its subcontractors with unspecifically racialized bodies in private gallery spaces; to appropriate Marxist and revolutionary rhetoric, in this case in order to normalize the processes of subcontracting and risk transfer; to affectively sell the documentation of neoliberalism to patrons of the global economic collapse; and to successfully define subcontracted human bodies, particularly those most subjected to racial capitalism, as raw material. In order to dismantle "criminal empires (Sierra)" and neoliberal capitalism Sierra re-enacts the terror and violence of neoliberal capitalism, all while making a profit. Sierra's utilizes a model where the abstraction of an idea (the critique of capitalism) becomes materialized not through a reading or investigation of

structural violence, but an enactment of oppression and a lived experience of terror—what many including the artist himself have referred to be performances of “pointless, meaningless unpleasant tasks” (Sierra). This visual representation is the gaze: guiding the customer into an affirmation of the critique of capitalism. His performances—if we must call them such—are spaces where his didactic depictions of neoliberal capitalism can be bought and represented by The Other for the global north consumer.

If Sierra does show us one thing it is that he displays the limits of Marxist rhetoric within gallery spaces and the possibility of Marxist critique to become co-opted by neoliberalism to further justify exploitation.

*

The critical focus brought by Kenning, Bishop, Fusco, Baum and others emphasizes that Sierra’s exploitations are valuable because they are interesting and educational: isn’t it so very interesting²⁶ that we can see the other? And that he is teaching and abiding the violence of capitalism? But then why not marvel at other acts that similarly demonstrate the violence of capitalism: the brutality of Wells Fargo’s well documented “ghetto loans” or the ways in which privatized military corporations have yet to answer for their countless murders? The critical arguments made by these writers seem to search and search for the humanity and hope of Santiago Sierra’s oeuvre without ever so much as tending to much less defending the bodies that he displays “without dignity” as nameless, interchangeable, permanent subcontractors. There are no arguments of humanity made for them; theirs is the site of loss to be filled, meaning to be managed.

Additionally, their criticism conveniently forgets how “The Other” is a western creation, specifically, it is the body that could not be managed²⁷ into modernist notions of progress.²⁸ It is the forced, tertiary body. The disappearing body. The body that exists but cannot articulate. Bishop, Fusco and Baum reason that The Other is being represented by Sierra²⁹ so we must observe, and we must do so without interrogation of how the subcontracted performance of The Other is the manufactured surveillance of the pleasures of high, white global north gallery culture. These are the conditions of the legitimized art world—the conditions of the extremely wealthy to maintain neoliberal capitalism as a system without rupture.

Perhaps critics at this current juncture cannot be trusted to read/defend/aid bodies that have been deemed by the field, and by the market, as fictitiously ‘raw’ material. This, however, does not mean that our social accountability for extant production and circulation disappears. A more critical and accountable focus might be: what does the interest in Sierra’s performances tell us about high-brow, gallery and museum culture? How has art continued to remain a site of exception—particularly a site permitted to enact exploitation and violence? What are the fissures between aesthetic, economic and political structures?

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What, then, is the point of replicating otherness/abjection as performance? Why not just pass out copies of *Homo Sacer*, *Capital* or the insightful text of choice? What is the pleasure of replication? For whom does it exist? A related question asks: what are the stakes of a critical response that says “absolutely not”? Of rejecting works such as *250cm* as useful, novel, or interesting performances? What are the stakes in asking for whom have these performances been meaningful, insightful, or revolutionary? What are the field stakes of calling Sierra’s projects utter, ignorant failures, expressions of white supremacist patriarchal racial capitalism from another exceptional artist working inside

the gallery system? What are the consequences of antagonizing Sierra's claims, his directorship?

In *The One and the Many*, art historian Grant Kester argues that there is a long fetishistic history of instructionally shocking aesthetic representation. Tracing a tradition from 19th Century documentary photographers such as Jacob Riis to Sierra, Grant argues that these artists deploy the old methodology of shock representation—as though it were new—to visualize/materialize the “marginalized” in order to “teach” the middle to upper class (the museum class) a “lesson.” Kester argues that artist such as Sierra believe, “[T]hat [they] can shock (implicitly bourgeois) viewers out of their complacency and into the correct critical consciousness of both the Other's suffering and their own privilege” (163). The criticism surrounding Sierra's oeuvre reads like fancy, theoretical footwork that attempts to utilize theory and philosophy to evade questions of power and exploitations for the sake of some anonymous global learning potential. It is the preservation of a narrative of radicality—for the development of art, through the sacrifice of Othered bodies. Perhaps viewers may feel the terror of the capitalism. Or perhaps the photograph will decorate a bathroom, the print out will lay on a coffee table. As Kester points out in “The Device Laid Bare,” art criticism to date has insured that the viewers are just as anonymous as the bodies inside—their point of connection only being their economic standing to purchase the photographs (rather than being inside of them) and to visit the gallery spaces, biennales, so forth.

Is it through the representation of terror and desperation that global north consumers may relish in the comforts of their “options”? The shock of this representation serves as a reminder to remain in the confines of their economic positioning. *250cm* maintains both that our value is immovable, and that it must be maintained. In interrogating artistic exceptionalism, Kester furthers that “Sierra conflates a critique of aesthetic autonomy with a critique of bourgeois complacency...The conflation is further complicated by his tendency to project his own guilt as a ‘white, Caucasian, male’ on to the implied view or audience of his work” (166). The viewer is assumed the ‘white Caucasian male’ subject position—the laborers in Sierra's projects objects for this gaze. The premise of Sierra's artwork fixates the white male gaze—an oppressive gaze that needs no further practice or circulation.

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Death of the Author, Rise of the CEO: Race & the Subcontract

We should have the theoretical courage not to identify the violence of liberation with the violence of repression, all subsumed under the general category of dictatorship. Terrible as it is, the Vietnamese peasant who shoots his landlord who has tortured and exploited him for decades is not doing the same thing as the landlord who shoots the rebelling slaves.

—Herbert Marcuse, Letter To Theodore Adorno, 21 July, 1969

In “Art Relations and the Presence of Absence,” Dean Kenning writes of Sierra's practices that he “does not represent this reality from a distance, but presents it in operation as the participation of the remunerated persons becomes a site-specific index of the existence of poverty and inequality” (438). The notion of site-specific index, is the aestheticization of terror. Who is the site? What creates this index? The scholarly discussions surrounding Sierra are conversations between those who have never been tattooed, touched or used by Sierra. Kenning continues,

Sierra's proposal to line up the gallery staff, bare backed in order of salary, from the director at one end to the cleaners and caterers at the other was rejected by both PS1 and the Kunsthalle Vienna...What this means in effect is that those with power and money are obviously not compelled to move out of their comfort zone and risk potential humiliation. (441)

The conversations begin at a vantage point from above. Where there are bodies below and bodies that can be inspected. The projects that never happened are the most important, as they are direct threats against neoliberal aesthetics. In an interview with Gerald Matt, Sierra discusses elements of the project above and explains: one came into fruition, and one was rejected. At the Project Space of Kunsthalle Vienna,³⁰ he had 30 men arranged via skin color going from lightest to darkest. He then wanted to install the same performance at PS1 in New York City but according to museum staff, but his request was denied. Sierra articulated that he wanted to show the “widespread” acceptance of racialized labor.³¹ According to Sierra, the results with the PS1 museum staff would've been the same as Vienna—highlighting the racialized structures of global capitalism. Race, or more accurately, anonymous black and brown bodies, becomes the shorthand for silence, labor and the subcontract. In this scheme silence is racialized. Material and labor are racialized. The subcontract is racialized. According to Sierra and the current narrative around his work, the subcontractors exist with no particularity other than as the announcement that the global south can be performed and contained to a particular gallery space, high value photograph. Every facet of the scenario is racialized, racialized from its imagination and inception.

Sierra articulates a reading that acknowledges that labor and power are racialized—but this critique takes him to reproduce one version of that scenario. The racialized bodies are there, but, as Sierra so clearly articulates in the failure of the PS1 project, other narratives have no reason to appear. There is not enough money, there is no danger, no force—his subcontract is an uneven incentive and will not be a sufficient mechanism of exchange between dominators. In this dynamic alone we can see that while there are no distinct methods from capitalism, there most definitely are clear distinctions and nuances within capitalism and capitalists. What might the subcontract have to be for the dominator to be defined, identified, staged and exhibited? This is an exchange where Sierra the manager must negotiate with another manager. Concerning this Grace Hong insightfully asks, “And would Sierra put himself in the line somewhere? Where would he end up?”

What kinds of tools from capitalism would he have to use to complete Sierra's PS1 performance? How much would Sierra have to give up, how devastated would his accounts be if he were to pay six prominent museums curators and directors to take off their clothes and line up according to rank to be gawked at? Would payment be enough? Here we can imagine what might it mean to focus the attention, not on the aesthetics of the damage in place, but on the enemy we cannot touch, whose name we know too well. Rather than of the bodies most damaged, might it be more revealing to have vulnerable visualizations of hierarchy, of power, of wealth? The men at the echelon, the men profiting from mass destruction, the graphics of it all: their moisturizer, their medications, their bare backs. Board meeting photographs. Transcriptions of execution plans. The palette that make up their handshakes.

Some contemporary critics have already prepared an answer against visually locating the enemy/the dominator, or imagining otherwise: we are all complicit. In the catalogue for the *Police* exhibition, a show in which Santiago Sierra was prominently included, Oliver Marchart explains,

If one is always operating on the same terrain as the adversary (“the enemy”) then the traditional accusation that one has been “recuperated”, [sic] that it has “sold out!” or been “assimilated!” loses its meaning. It presupposes, in fact, that there can be a clear distinction between the instance of power or the State on one hand and that of the resistance or refusal on the other. (73)

It is fraudulent to insinuate that we are all complicit when the police exists to protect some and slaughter others. The position of the enemy is not obscured for western nation states: as we are perpetually engaged in war. This removed from accountability and defensive rhetoric, while comforting for curators, gallerists, writers, artists, and patrons who congregate within high art’s ecology, completely misses and refuses to comprehend the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism, global north dominance and global white supremacy. And to miss the dynamics of oppression—within a gallery show about The Police—is baffling, but not surprising. This is an economic space that profits from locating and normalizing complicity.

In the context of defining the enemy we can see the importance of Sierra’s own “Noes.” According to his own methodology there are no “other ways” than the eternal damnation of capitalism. However, there are those who can utter “No.” Thus far those subjects include: museum curators, and himself. In this sense, he is fully capable of addressing, humiliating, mocking, and subverting the enemy—which for him at one point was the Spanish state. Contrary to Marchart’s claim that we are all complicit and the enemy is obscured, Sierra’s “No” campaign, and his rejection of awards and the museum curator’s rejection of the proposal displays that (unlike Fusco, Bishop, Kenning, Baum, and others) some are able to identify the enemy and address him accordingly. The enemy is unified. They will not reveal their symbolic price. They will not perform, they will say “No.” They are shielded from humiliation. They can say “No” (ironic that the wealthy and powerful are the only articulators of Sierra’s “NO” campaign). All space is theirs, all economic space is theirs for the taking. The performance of wealth is the lived reality of their “No.” For these reasons and others, Sierra makes the critique of capitalism as its advertisement, filled with bodies he has stated he does not need to negotiate with, but under the rhetoric and tutelage of capitalism, can exploit to his will.

*

Kenning posits that Sierra is ultimately interested in a “new” kind of aesthetic practice.³² This practice is one where ideas prevail before materials and the artist is analogous to the head of a company rather than a laborer. In contemporary finance, the creation of ideas and the transfer of risk for profit are the most highly prized forms of immaterial labor (Maiello) and must be valued as such—the same logic applies to the arts. Such discussions display the commitment of the arts to capital’s imagination and finance’s logic. In fact the artist, while compensated as such, now exists as the figure of immateriality. Kenning argues for this, describing, “the artist as a present absence rather than an absent presence...” (442). Regardless of the material presence of the artist, his ideas will be manifested. Kenning continues about Sierra’s work:

In displacing the action from the artist’s own body to the bodies of others, Sierra thereby takes part in the more general move away from individual interiority as embodied by the artists—*the authenticity of the artist’s suffering flesh—towards the elimination of the physical presence of the artists who now becomes an absent director or organizer, operating ‘behind the scenes’.* If this ‘death of the author’ takes the shape of a dispersed collection of participants (the audience, the public), an alternative trajectory sees the artists-subject

condense into an image of absence made visible through the physical presence of the artists him or herself. (442) [Emphasis Mine]

To conclude in the final and beautiful death of the author, for the rise of his omnipresence! This is the aestheticization of displacement, the transferred materialization of alterity. Death of the author before the death of copyright and the death of patrons, galleries, agents...death to the only position of accountability that scholarship has been able to locate! Death to complications of positionality and nothing else... This death is a capitalist fallacy grounded in white supremacists denials of property formations.³³ As long as there is an author collecting payments as the author, depositing it into an account labeled with that author's name, building a career under that author's name, why must we continue to pretend there is no author? The "death" of the author towards the rise of the CEO.

*

The Artist and His Object

Rancière's reading of Marx is particularly illuminating and helpful in understanding why Sierra and his writers deploy a Marxism-as-public-relations—theirs is a Marxism that instructs from a particularly exclusive position of power. Jacques Rancière³⁴ argues that there is a historical, philosophical and leftist tradition of requiring silence from the poor. The inspection of a higher truth/art/idea becomes solidified only through the author's objectification of others, be it in the service of a revolution, an artistic shift, or a philosophical undertaking. The subject position and more importantly the ideas (the intellectual, immaterial labor), come only through the work, the lived experience, and the material labor of the other. And as long as this division of power is maintained, analyses of capital and value can be filled with the endless nuances.

Rancière provides many reasons for why Marx required the poor to be distant in order for his writing³⁵ to continue (68). Rancière calls this practice, "[E]xclusion by homage" (xxvi). I will extend this critique through Santiago Sierra's practice of what I call "homage via exclusion." In the case of Sierra, this re-presentation (the re-presentation, the endless replication) is delivered as a reminder that the conditions under which the poor live, though exhibitable, cannot ever be changed. The six men in *250cm* are worthy of homage because they can never be financially included, they cannot be compensated as commercial artists, they cannot conquer their enemy. *250cm* is representation that highlights the tradition and desire to distill the poor, the other, as objects. It encapsulates the dominator's fear of them as anything else but objects.

Rancière argues that in Marx's writing one can witness his dislike for contradictory or categorical shifts. Using a fable of the shoemaker poet that Marx pushed against, Rancière elucidates Marx's need for the proletariat to stay as such. For Marx, participation in aesthetics was the entryway to bourgeois submission, which would follow submission to capitalism—voiding the revolution. The function of the proletariat was to see the virtue of one's chosen labor, and to remain militantly protective of its value. The function of the proletariat was to remain—the function of the philosopher was to behold their placement. This dynamic, Rancière posits, reveals the position and desires of the philosopher. Of this power play he extends,

It does not have written on it that it is the 'sign of the division of labor that marks it as the property of capital' except in the form of hieroglyphics *that cannot be read* by workers who wear on their brows the sign of a people both *chosen and condemned*. (75) [Emphasis Mine]

The philosopher utilizes languages, media, and genres the worker is never meant to have access to. The artist deals in artifacts the worker cannot afford; the worker is purposefully alienated. The processes of such critiques require the existence of an object that can be transformed into a subject if the precise instructions are followed. The transition from object to subject is the condition of being both chosen and condemned, excluded yet represented.

Rancière goes as far as to say that it is through the *Manifesto* that proletarians are granted subjecthood,³⁶ but that such conditions of subject making encompass the power that continues to divide the world. The curse of being ‘chosen and condemned’ described above echoes Sierra’s convenient inscription of capitalism as “eternal damnation.” In this cycle Sierra is tasked to be the artist who waits with his objects. He instructs them to perform meaningless tasks again and again, waiting. Rancière argues that such binaries preserve “[T]he distance between revolutionary justice and social health” (xxvii). Sierra’s practice reproduces itself artificially, again and again by materializing this distance. The politics of *250cm* maintains this distance under the rhetoric of revolutionary justice—for the consumer of the photograph.

In this formulation of Marx, desire is associated with aesthetics and is categorized as bourgeois placemaking. The laborer must remain the laborer, and must be compensated as such. Their fixated placement, their suffering is the homage—exclusion from the realm of aesthetic desire and subjecthood is the only way to remain pure and uncompromised. In these events, desire becomes the proletariat’s suicide and mechanism out of revolutionary purity. The subcontracted proletariat remains pure by remaining as such—this is what Sierra’s artist position *bravely* offers their world.

*

Though this paper focuses on Sierra’s repetitive performances, Sierra’s body of work is neither exceptional nor unique. He is one of many commercial artists, such as Vanessa Beecroft, Thomas Hirschhorn, Francis Alys, that make work by subcontracting human bodies (often bodies of the other) as the material base for abstracting and literalizing their global north aesthetic/political vision. Sierra, however, more so than the others has refined his rhetorical defense for subcontracting and replication.

Rancière writes that authors “can cure the hysterics at the cost of having some of them die” (247). Representation and surveillance are the gestures of sacrifice, but not Sierra’s. Perhaps it is not that Sierra does not understand the political significance of their metaphors, it is that he does not accept that this metaphor must include his own in order for it to be his sacrifice. The bodies in *250cm*, invisible yet marked and priced, become the reasons I cannot move beyond them to witness Sierra’s vision. If Santiago Sierra chose bodies as material because he felt they were the truest material to work with, he fails because their presence could *never* create an absence. Their surveilled presence becomes the antithesis to aestheticized abstractions.³⁷

After almost two decades of subcontracting pointless tasks, a global NO tour, with the history of similar approaches—it is reasonable to conclude that neoliberal aesthetics cannot shock the viewer into a critique of capitalism or refine understandings of exploitation—at best and most, it accomplishes to keep its own subgenre alive. At this point, perhaps it is time we take Santiago Sierra’s insistence that he is not capable of producing anything other than neoliberal capitalism seriously, by rejecting his work, his approach, and all celebrations of neoliberal aesthetics.

*

Coda: Black Marxism

The Black radical tradition cast doubt on the extent to which capitalism penetrated and re-formed social life and on its ability to create entirely new categories of human experience stripped bare of the historical consciousness embedded in culture. It gave them cause to question the authority of a radical intelligentsia drawn by its own analyses from marginal and ambiguous social strata to construct an adequate manifestation of proletarian power. And it drew them more and more toward the actual discourse of revolutionary masses, the impulse to make history on their own terms....[T]he continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.

—on the Black Radical Tradition, *Black Marxism* Cedric Robinson

This paper concludes where Rancière did not and Sierra could not³⁸ take it—it travels via a route provided by Black Studies,³⁹ a familiar, unfixed space—by ontologically fixating on liberation⁴⁰ as its only possible conclusion.

Sierra's artistic oeuvre situates *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People* by him, via the processes of capitalism, which is both normal, eternal and damned. A proper, Marxist critique inspects the mode of production, its fixed and artificial circulation, the damage of its exploitation, and organizes accordingly. Rancière is introduced to critique the power relations of this task. The Black Marxist coda might be to proclaim the ways in which migrant day laborers, homeless women, sex workers—regardless of representation and in spite of it—have and are already altering the dynamics of capital. This is not an excavation project, this is an approach that is ontologically shared but without prescription. An approach committed to studying the dismantling of powers already at play, rather than re-fashioning and commodifying their aesthetic weapons. It refuses the instructions of the *dominator*. It looks for the power of the weak and imagines collective liberation.

The weapon is turned away. The dominator believes this is His order: to have the bodies against the wall. *250cm* is a reminder of what money and power mean to Him. *250cm* is a portrait of how and when he controls their time. This is his one frame. What he was able to capture.

And the lines blocking each side are exits that exist for no one but the bodies inside—

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Notes








Notes

1. Concerning the necessity of a wealthy patron class as Sierra's audience Grant Kester argues, "Art, for Sierra, functions as a kind of alibi for bourgeois complacency, allowing viewers to experience unearned moments of aesthetic transcendence" (165). [↗](#)
2. The normalization and glorification of the subcontract and towards contract-based organizations. See Oliver E. Williamson's "The Theory of the Firm as Governance Structure: From Choice to Contract," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 16(3), pp. 171-195. Demetri Kantarelis's *Theories of the Firm*, particularly chapter 3. [↗](#)
3. Max Haiven's term from, "Finance as Capital's Imagination?: Reimagining Value and Culture in an Age of Fictitious Capital and Crisis." [↗](#)
4. Walter Benn Michaels in "Neoliberal Aesthetics: Fried, Rancière and the Form of the Photograph" and Joseph Jeon in "Neoliberal Forms: CGI, Algorithm, and Hegemony in Korea's IMF Cinema" situate "neoliberal forms/aesthetics" as forms of refusal, or forms of potential unveiling. While I find their investigations to be rich, my definition of the term takes a different focus. [↗](#)
5. I came across Jane Blocker's essay, "The Aesthetization of Risk is Wartime" before reading Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty*. But I would like to note that Nelson also used Blocker's critique of risk as a way to discuss and critique Santiago Sierra. [↗](#)
6. Blocker wonders what "(A)n artist boycott of risk might look like, and whether our refusal to participate in that game would help productively to change its rules." What might it look like if museums, art historians, artists, economists and so forth, boycotted risk transfers rather than celebrated them? [↗](#)
7. Fred Moten has a different take to Hartman's critique, see *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. [↗](#)
8. In the Tate Modern Museum video documentation for *Group of Person Facing a Wall*, Sierra articulates that he is against the artist brand/regime and therefore will not reveal his face. As rhetoric devoid of the context of his aesthetic approach to subcontracting, this is an interesting notion. In capitalist economies, value is linked closest to the fiction of the brand, rather than the 'quality' or the 'labor' of the object in question. However, the Santiago Sierra brand is not dependent on his face or body—it is linked to his name and the repetitive enactments of using "Other" people's bodies. Once again tedious contradictions are introduced: is Sierra resisting then, the function of branding in capitalism by hiding his face, though as the essay discusses later, he purports to stay within the confines of capitalist methodologies? It should be noted however that he is not anonymous. He is present at his gallery openings, and other such events. I would add that it is an act of immense cowardice to be the manager of brutality but remain anonymous, ensuring to never be met with


detailed and focused protest himself. For full video


see: <https://vimeo.com/35787572>. 

9. In *The Communist Hypothesis* Alain Badiou argues for failure to be witnessed as a process towards a directed goal. 
10. An excerpt from an interview of Santiago Sierra on his methods, “You are of the opinion that it is wrong to say that people work for money and sell their time and that somebody who says so is a great liar, and this in fact suggests some priggishness in dealing with these issues” (Matt, 152). 
11. Currently the *250cm* photographs have all been sold. Price and information obtained by Lisson Gallery in 2012 & 2014. 
12. Rancière’s quib: “I forgot that I had never known how to draw a straight line” (xxvii). 
13. Haiven writes, “It is the singular success of capital as a form of social imagination to prevent its beneficiaries from seeing the endemic violence of its economic real- ties. (sic) Every financial crisis is a crisis of the political imagination when ‘the violence of finance’ is taken for a periodic abnormality rather than the most blatant of the system’s necessary contradictions” (112). 
14. Of the consequences of finance Haiven writes, “Money’s value is at once absolutely imaginary (it is merely a ‘useless’ token to which we culturally ascribe value and power) and terrifyingly materially and utterly real in its social effects and its power over social values (its presence and its absence quite literally kill hundreds of millions of people every year from needless disease, malnutrition, and greed-or poverty- provoked violence).” (102). Other than this there are no other references to racial capitalism. 
15. I am borrowing Zygmunt Bauman’s terminology. 
16. Grant Kester also has an incisive reading of this passage. See *The One and the Many*, page 169. 
17. A recent example of this is Hyundai Corporation’s 11 year sponsorship of Tate’s Turbine Hall—the longest corporate sponsorship in museum/gallery history. For a full diagnosis of this contemporary phenomena, see *Privatising Culture*, by Chin-Tao Wu. 
18. As if it is not already the lived experience of the subcontracted. 
19. For a compelling take on the function of aesthetic realms and structures, see Sianne Ngai’s *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012. 
20. Sierra affirms his beliefs, “I can’t change anything. There is no possibility that we can change any- thing with our artistic work. We do our work because we are making art, and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality. But I don’t believe in the possibility of change.” *Santiago Sierra: Works 2002–1990* (Birmingham, England: Ikon Gallery, 2002). 
21. In arguing for the necessity of failure and repetition, while inspecting the ruins of the movements of 1968, Alain Badiou in *The Communist Hypothesis* poses the following possibilities, “What would a political practice that was not willing to keep everyone in their place look like? A political practice that accepted new trajectories, impossible encounters, and meetings between people who did not usually talk to each other? At that point, we realized without really understanding it, that if a new emancipatory politics was possible, it would turn social classifications upside down. It would not consist in organizing everyone in the places where they were, but in organizing lighting displacements, both material and mental.” (60) 

22. Art historian Jaleh Mansoor in her lecture "The General Strike" describes subcontractors to be 'paid volunteers.' She does so when describing, *133 persons paid to have their hair dyed blonde*, 2001, an enactment that bleached 133 persons hair for 120,00 lire (60 dollars) at the Venice Biennale. In this series Sierra specifically subcontracts refugees or immigrants, of African, East European, Asian, Middle Eastern descent. Mansoor calls them "paid volunteers" and that Sierra "collected them" see full lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHjnUivdqzc>. 
23. I strongly disagree that EDT parallels the practice of Sierra. First, members of EDT actively work with their target audience, and work to create both tools and weapons. Ricardo Dominguez has outlined that the *The Transborder Immigrant Tool* was distributed freely as cell-phone devices, but also placed online as a downloadable app. Second, the TBT does not require the representation (and thus reproduction) of suffering, abjection or humiliation to "intervene" into empire—in fact, its primary function is to be useful and simultaneously poetically intervene into the lives of those crossing the border. Third, the success of TBT is dependent on its usage; accountability and justice are at the heart of its theater. On the other hand, Sierra's projects, particularly the sold-out *250cm* photographs, exist regardless of their interventions, usefulness, or dedication to accountability. In fact, *250cm's* existence is dependent on its complete disregard for the material, immaterial, affective labor required for transformative justice and decolonization. Lastly, the bodies and lives of EDT members are linked to their performance in a way Sierra remains exempt. Dominguez in particular has been charged with countless legal suits by the federal and state government for his participation in TBT. Electronic Disturbance Theater confronts empire—while Sierra's enactments humiliate and exploit the same targets as empire. The FBI, NSA, and California state government ban together to protect its rudimentary investment: the border. The consistent heavy-handed defense of Sierra's political and critical project by art historians and artists mimics tactics of the state's attack against EDT: they are similarly protecting their investment, in this case their particular exceptionalized definition of art, artists, and their rights in complete disregard for those most defenseless. 
24. "No, Global Tour" was his 2010 installation campaign, where a truck driving the sign "No" stopped at various locations throughout Europe. The "No" is to represent a rejection of the state/capitalism. 
25. This part was hyperlinked to his website, www.noglobaltour.com. 
26. There could be a longer discussion here as to how class and taste contributes to what is acceptable and desirable in high gallery economies. In *Privatising Culture*, Chin Tao Wu pulls from Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, to display how cultural capital functions as museum culture and how museum culture becomes an "instrument of domination". The shared agreement between gallerists, critics and patrons on Sierra's enactment might be an indicator of their class standing. 
27. For full argument concerning the violence of representation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988. 271-313. 
28. This point is argued in depth by Edward Said in *Orientalism* and by Chandra Mohanty in *Under Western Eyes*. 

29. This is a crude subpoint but is Sierra a qualified commentator concerning the devastating and violent conditions of structural poverty? Why his desires as a wealthy and successful artist must be taken above his subcontractors has yet to be addressed. [↗](#)
30. When asked why he selected Vienna for this project, Sierra responds, "In Vienna, just like in the rest of the European Union, a strange discussion is going on that is all about race but without ever using the term. But they are only getting adjusted to something that is a common practice in places such as New York" (316). In *Interviews* with Gerald Watt. [↗](#)
31. What Denise Ferreira de Silva has described as "global raciality;" see *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. [↗](#)
32. For a provocative examination of new aesthetic forms see Shannon Jackson's *Social Works*. New York: Routledge, 2011. [↗](#)
33. Regarding the legalities of property I am looking to Cheryl Harris' seminal work "Whiteness as Property." [↗](#)
34. Of Santiago Sierra Rancière has strangely stated, "I don't have a lot of sympathy for Santiago Sierra's actions, but when he pays immigrant workers minimum wage to dig their own graves or to get tattoos that signify their condition, he reminds us at least that the "equivalence" of an hour of work and its effect on the body is not the so-called equivalence of everything that slides across a screen." This statement vastly differs from Rancière's own critique of Marx's fraught position of power as teacher, writer, revolutionary. In *The One and the Many*, Grant Kester has an in-depth critique of Jacques Rancière's approach to contemporary visual arts. While I agree with Kester's assessment of Rancière's non-materialist approach to the field of contemporary art, I find Rancière's political philosophy to differ significantly. [↗](#)
35. Rancière writes, "In Manchester the employees of the firm of Ermen and Engels also work so that the partner Engels can use the earnings of capital to keep the scientist Karl Marx from having to take a "job," allowing him rather to devote himself to the work that will bring the proletariat into being as the pure subject of the destruction of capital" (104). [↗](#)
36. Rancière states, "...Manifesto gives him existence as a subject" (81). [↗](#)
37. In 2011, the young artist Gerry Duran re-configured Sierra's work in a short film titled "Art Talks." Duran, sticking to Sierra's form and methods, subcontracted friends from his community with gummy bears and subcontracted another friend to paint rainbows on their backs. By using friends and those closest to him, Duran critiques Sierra's labor narrative: how Sierra is able to objectify his laborers within his art project and outside of it as raw material, as objects of exploitation. When describing the project Duran writes that he does not understand how Sierra was able to capitulate to his performance at all, as Duran "got this weird heinous feeling inside" participating in his friends being painted for his art—even if they were just painted with rainbows. As Duran describes the relationship between subjects, he empathizes with and relates to those who participate in his filmmaking. For the video see: <https://vimeo.com/26689613#at=2>. [↗](#)
38. See, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007. [↗](#)
39. In *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye writes, "Black Studies illuminates the essential role that racializing assemblages play in the construction of modern

selfhood, works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human. In doing so, black studies pursues a politics of global liberation beyond the genocidal shackles of Man” (4). 

40. This formulation of Black Studies was articulated during Jared Sexton’s talk at the 2014 UC Irvine’s APAAC conference in the workshop “Anti-Blackness and Asian Americans.” 

 [Bio](#)

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Eunsong Kim is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, San Diego. Her essays on contemporary culture and art criticism have appeared or are forthcoming in: *Model View Culture*, *The New Inquiry*, *AAWW’s The Margins*, *Art in America*, and others.



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